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**Government of the District of Columbia**



**Executive Office of the Mayor**

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Testimony of  
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***“Back to the Drawing Board:  
A First Look at Lessons Learned from Katrina”***

Committee on Government Reform  
United States House of Representatives  
Tom Davis, Chair

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Room 2154  
Rayburn House Office Building  
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Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member and members of the Committee thank you for the opportunity to appear today to discuss emergency preparedness and the lessons learned from Katrina. As we sit here today, our efforts to support the Katrina response and recovery continue. I am certain that as time goes on and we gain better insight into what did or did not happen in terms of preparation and response on the Gulf Coast, we will be better able to identify improvements in our own preparedness.

But before I begin, I would like to take this opportunity, on behalf of Mayor Anthony Williams, the people of the District of Columbia, and the people of the National Capital Region, to express our deepest sympathy, commitment to continued support, and foremost consideration in our thoughts and prayers to the people of the Gulf Coast who have been affected by this tragedy. I am myself a survivor of Gulf Coast hurricanes, and know the horrors and devastation they can bring to individuals and families. We will continue to do all we can to help in any way possible the people affected by as well as those working on the recovery from Katrina.

## **Overview**

Since September 11, 2001, the District of Columbia and the National Capital Region have been at the forefront of preparing ourselves for any disaster we might face. With the seat of the federal government housed in our great city, we recognize and accept the awesome responsibility that we have. As is the case with cities, regions, and states across the country, September 11 changed the way we think about how we can prevent, protect against, respond to, and recover from a large scale event. Based on what we have seen over the last few weeks, Katrina will do likewise.

In the District and in the region, we have taken an all-hazards approach to our preparedness. We have made great progress in strengthening our capabilities and have done so with the engagement of a multitude of government, private sector, and community partners. That said, we always seek ways to improve. We learn from every exercise or real event we have here in the region, and incorporate improvements in our preparedness as a result. And we will certainly study all of the circumstances surrounding hurricane Katrina to ensure we incorporate those lessons learned as well.

In my testimony today, I will discuss the challenges we face in the District of Columbia, and how we are confronting those challenges. Moreover, I will point to some distinctions between the District and New Orleans that are relevant to differences in how we would manage an event such as Katrina. Finally, I will discuss aspects of our preparedness that we are reexamining in light of Katrina.

## **Challenges we face**

### *High risk of event, including events that may come without warning*

As the nation's capital, the District of Columbia and the surrounding region, with its concentration of symbolic and critical federal government facilities, is one of the highest risk

areas in the country for a terrorist attack. The White House, the Capitol, headquarters for the FBI and the World Bank, as well as the many monuments and structures of national historic significance and the crowds they attract render the District vulnerable to those who would do our nation harm.

The region is also in the path of hurricanes, and though they are often tempered due to inland travel, they can create significant impact, such as what we experienced with Hurricane Isabel two years ago. Hurricanes can spawn tornadoes and are often accompanied by significant flooding, both of which can cause great property damage and loss of life.

The aging infrastructure in the District and the region also make it vulnerable to power and water outages, which could cause significant disruption. The recent closure of the power plant in Alexandria removed a significant element of the District's electric power system's redundancy. Recent breaks of the District's century-old water mains left thousands without or with reduced-pressure water.

Disasters do not respect political jurisdictional boundaries. Both man-made and natural disasters are likely to directly or indirectly impact many of the jurisdictions that comprise the National Capital Region simultaneously. The region includes two states, numerous counties and cities, and of course the federal government.

Preparation therefore requires coordination and collaboration of multiple governments. While we have been working together as a region for many years, and have developed strong relationships and practices of collaboration, coordination with some elements of the federal government remains a challenge. Some executive and legislative branch agencies focus on their own mission and people without regard to the surrounding population, which can pose command and control problems during an emergency.

Many of the federal agencies have their own law enforcement units with emergency response and evacuation plans that are not shared and therefore coordinated with the District. To properly prepare for a disaster, all first responders need to be aware of each other's responsibilities and plans. Moreover, the nearly three dozen law enforcement agencies in the District need to coordinate their plans and activities with our Metropolitan Police Department, the primary law enforcement agency in the District. We are making efforts to address these challenges to ensure that the District is prepared for a catastrophic incident.

#### *Diverse population, including low-income and special needs*

The District of Columbia has a significant poor and sick population, as well as many with special needs. As we've seen in New Orleans, it is not safe to assume that all people within a city will be prepared for or able to respond to an emergency in the same way. As the number two transit-using city in the country, the District has a large percentage of people that do not own cars, for example. Our plans need to accommodate this kind of diversity.

#### **How will we meet these challenges?**

Through significant investments in planning, training, equipment, and scenario-based exercises, we are confident that the District and the region will be able to meet the challenges that we may face. When the District decided to craft its District Response Plan to mirror the Federal Response Plan, we were convinced that it would pay dividends in any major disaster. We have implemented the District Response Plan for events including Hurricane Isabel, Anthrax incidents, IMF/World Bank protests, the Presidential Inauguration, the state funeral for Ronald Reagan, and dozens of other incidents. None of these events was as catastrophic as hurricane Katrina, but each one tested the plan in a different way and required significant coordination.

The District understands the value in a plan is in how well people and agencies train to, exercise, and update the plan with lessons learned. We have done just that.

- We have trained thousands of first responders on the National Incident Management System, the District Response Plan, responding to weapons of mass destruction, and simply how to work and manage emergencies from our emergency operations center. The primary reason was to build capacity for events such as September 11<sup>th</sup> or Hurricane Katrina.
- We have educated residents and workers in the District by developing community preparedness plans and exercising those plans with District, business and resident representatives in 39 separate neighborhoods across the District.
- We have initiated several new notification systems including a text alert and voice alert systems allowing us to call every phone in the district or send text messages to phones, pagers and e-mail accounts for people who have registered.
- We have conducted exercises at all levels of the District Government in partnership with other government partners to focus on real-life scenarios. On March 3 of this year, for example, the District held a senior leader exercise using a hurricane incident with significantly more damage than we saw during Hurricane Isabel to review the corrective actions we made after that storm. During this exercise, the leaders developed plans for closing schools, making mass transit decisions, protecting critical infrastructure, opening and managing shelters, deploying medical resources, rescuing victims, and evacuating residents.
- The District has developed, trained to, and exercised a Strategic National Stockpile Plan, which has achieved the highest rating (green) from the Centers for Disease Control. This plan outlines how we will get needed pharmaceuticals from the Stockpile to District responders and residents in an emergency situation.
- The District was one of the first jurisdictions in the nation to achieve accreditation through the Emergency Management Accreditation Program.

The District Response Plan has proven success and we plan to build on its success. Furthermore, the District has established good and strong working relationships with the surrounding states and with federal government agencies. The District emergency response plans have to coordinate across the region and with the federal government. The Mayor of the District of Columbia along with the Governors of Virginia and Maryland have taken the necessary steps to strengthen the regions' emergency response capabilities.

Following 9/11, the Mayor of the District of Columbia and the Governors of Maryland and Virginia committed to working together to prepare the region. With the President, they established a Senior Policy Group to lead decision making and coordination between local and state governments, and the federal government. This group works with the region's Chief Administrative Officers, who represent local government leadership, to provide a coordinated and institutionalized process for defining needs across the region and for meeting those needs through coordinated decision-making and implementation.

There are a multitude of areas where we have achieved tangible progress across the region in preparing for large scale incidents. These achievements range from equipment enhancements for first responders to improved information sharing and coordination among communities, state and federal entities, and the private sector.

Equipment purchases have and continue to capitalize on our regional structure by acquiring, allocating, standardizing and managing equipment and systems regionally to enhance preparedness, response and recovery efforts. Just a few of the projects we have initiated include the following.

- Through the purchase of 1,250 800 MHz radios, we have developed equipment caches that can be deployed in an emergency when other means of communications are inoperable. These radios can be deployed in two hours, can be reprogrammed while they are in use, have an immediate 24-hour battery life, and are supplemented by 2,500 rechargeable batteries. They can be used in an emergency and will allow all regional emergency medical services, fire, and law enforcement officials the ability to communicate throughout the region. These radios are housed in separate caches in Maryland and Virginia, with a third to be added soon in the District.
- We are developing a complete interoperable data communications infrastructure that will enable emergency response officials within the region to share and exchange emergency information in real time. It will lead to the implementation of secure, diverse, robust physical networks over which shared data and messages reach their destinations via the implementation of interoperability hub for data sets and messaging functions exchanged by regional partners.
- We have equipped our first responders with Level A/B gear for first responders, such as tactical law enforcement groups, which will allow them to function in the midst of a Chemical, Biological Radioactive, Nuclear, and Explosive (CBRNE) attack. This gear is for mid-level CBRNE attacks and will allow law enforcement to maintain a stable

number of personnel on site during or after an emergency, and provides for equipment interoperability across the region.

- We have funded the purchase of hospital surge beds to be added to the hospitals within the region. This initiative, along with investments in medical mass transport vehicles and an information system to track patient flow and provider capacity, will enhance the ability of the region to handle a significant increase of patients during a terrorist attack or natural disaster.

The region also ensures preparedness efforts are fully coordinated and appropriately integrated so that preparedness and prevention planning efforts are consistent, non-duplicative, efficient, and effective. Some of these initiatives include the following.

- We have developed and just last week launched a Citizen Education Campaign to raise awareness and to provide emergency preparedness information to residents and businesses, with a focus on how to prepare for a major disaster. We timed this campaign to coincide with National Preparedness Month. The arrival of Katrina has made this campaign all the more timely. Katrina has certainly shown us that individual, family, and business preparedness is vital to a region's ability to respond to and recover from a disaster.
- We have developed disaster preparedness educational materials entitled "Masters of Disaster", which are becoming part of area schools' curricula for grades K through 12. Currently, 4,341 full kits have been distributed to 459 schools, and kits for home-schooled children are available in public libraries throughout the region.
- We have developed a syndromic surveillance and notification system for public health emergencies. This system enables health professionals to detect unusual disease patterns at their early stages by conducting an around-the-clock regional surveillance.
- We are developing designated secure and safe locations, where residents can receive comprehensive assistance in their efforts to locate family members. The goal of this effort is to consolidate the victim data, missing person data, and inquire from various sources, which could include shelters, hospitals, medical examiners' offices, and other locations.

And we have made progress in addressing special needs populations. As a region, we have developed the Disability Preparedness Center Initiative, which is a program designed to prepare first responders to aid people with physical and mental disabilities and other special needs during an emergency.

The Disability Preparedness Center has provided technical assistance and skills development to first responders to assist persons with disabilities. The Center sought persons with disabilities to assist with developing response plans, plan and implement an information campaign to inform

the public, establish a regional Disability Advisory Committee, and develop emergency communication network for persons with disabilities.

In 2004, the region hosted a two-and-a-half day conference on Emergency Preparedness and Special Needs Populations and Planning issues. The conference agenda included disaster preparedness, response, and recovery training and forums specific to the special needs population. The audience was drawn from government, emergency first responders, service network, individual advocacy groups and private business and technology communities, and covered the following topics:

- Effective communication of emergency messages before, during and after an emergency
- Special needs shelter location identification
- Staffing ratios
- Equipment resources
- Appropriate allocation and coordination of accessible transportation during evacuations
- Distribution of special needs emergency guidance

In the spring of 2005, the Disability Preparedness Center worked to determine first responder needs, trained first responders to work with individuals with special needs, disseminated accessible products, provided media for individuals with intellectual deficits, planned simulations and exercises, and conducted a focus test group for responders on how to deal with individuals with disabilities.

With continued specialized training, such as the training provided by the Disability Preparedness Center, the District will be better prepared to assist the elderly, physically disabled, and mentally disabled in an emergency.

### **Differences between New Orleans and the District**

While there are certainly lessons from Katrina that will help us improve our preparedness here in the District and in the region, there are differences between the two areas that are relevant to any comparative analysis.

First, there are geographic differences between the District and New Orleans. New Orleans is coastal and below sea-level, which renders it more vulnerable to tropical storms and flooding. While we have faced extreme weather in the National Capital Region, we are not likely to experience a hurricane comparable to Katrina nor the flooding that followed, which brings its own set of challenges.

Second, the District of Columbia and the surrounding jurisdictions have done a considerable amount of planning and have conducted numerous exercises and collectively experienced a number of real events requiring response to natural and man-made disasters. Week in and week out, we work together, prepare together, plan together, train together, and exercise together as a region. We do face challenges due to the fact that we have many jurisdictions at all levels of government throughout the region, each with its own jurisdictional autonomy. But when it

comes to emergency preparedness, we have developed a structure and practice that enables and has institutionalized a regional approach that respects but transcends political boundaries. This strength as a region provides us with a robust resource base that serves us well in dealing with major events.

Third, unlike the City of New Orleans, the District does not have the bureaucratic issues that can arise when trying to determine whether an emergency is a state or city matter. Because the District of Columbia is both city and state, when a disaster strikes, the Mayor has sole and full responsibility and all agencies follow his command and adhere to the emergency response plans in place. The convenience of this arrangement means he does not have a state or local jurisdictions to negotiate with. Unless it is an event that requires federal jurisdiction due to its nature or magnitude, the Mayor of the District of Columbia is in charge and will execute the District Emergency Response plans. Even when a federal agency may technically be the lead for an event, it is in most cases the District's first responders that are on the scene and lead the initial response. In all cases we, along with our federal and regional partners, manage incidents in accordance with the National Response Plan and National Incident Management System.

Finally, a major and perhaps the most significant distinction between New Orleans and the District is the presence of the federal government. Should there be a disaster that overwhelms the resources of the state and local governments in the region, the proximity of the federal government and nearby federal assets assure more timely deployment of federal resources. And while Katrina has taught us to be cautious about our reliance on federal response, the availability of federal resources in and around the nation's capital and the well established working relationship we have with the federal government will likely ensure federal aid when needed.

However, the presence of the federal government does present some challenges. Here in the region, we have experienced a history of independent actions on the part of some federal agencies, such as street closures, which can actually impede disaster response. Other independent actions, such as personnel evacuations or employee prophylaxis distribution can likewise complicate local response. While in many respects we work daily with federal partners, we have learned that the federal government is not monolithic, and good working relationships with some parts of the federal government does not guarantee coordination with all parts.

But the District is unique in that we do coordinate with the federal government on everyday events and incidents. Over the last two years, we have planned and coordinated a presidential inauguration, a state funeral, the World War II memorial dedication, 4<sup>th</sup> of July fireworks with hundreds of thousands of spectators, and dozens of other smaller events. The planning for these events, the training of our personnel together and the mutual exercises we hold with the federal government and our regional stakeholders provides us with a good understanding of how our federal partners will work with us during a major event.

Our Metropolitan Police Department knows how to coordinate and work with military and other local police officers from across the country because they have done it. Our local Fire and Emergency Medical Services Department works with local fire-fighting, search & rescue, and emergency medical service departments from Maryland and Virginia for almost every major



event. Our Emergency Management Agency coordinates activities such as early work releases during snowstorms each winter and emergency notification throughout the region every day, and coordinates with local, state, and federal counterparts across the region.

Whether we are investigating a possible terrorist incident or we are responding to a catastrophic event, our daily coordination allows us to have a relationship unlike that between the federal government and any other state or region. We know each other, we work with each other, we plan with each other and we have responded together.

### **Initial Lessons Learned**

As I have expressed, I have a high level of confidence in the District's and the region's ability to manage a major event, be it of natural or man-made cause. Nevertheless, as a result of the insights we are getting from Katrina, even while events are still unfolding on the Gulf Coast, we are taking a hard look at our plans and capabilities and the assumptions that underlie them.

The first major area we are reviewing is evacuation. The District has a disaster evacuation plan. We have designated evacuation routes, variable message signage, signal timing algorithms, buses for those without cars, and other aspects of traffic management in place to enable evacuation. And we have tested some of these elements to various degrees, most recently following the July 4<sup>th</sup> fireworks. But the tragic events of Katrina, especially as it relates to those who chose not to or were unable to evacuate, have forced us to challenge some of the assumptions of our evacuation plans. Ultimately, we need to have a workable plan in place to evacuate the entire District of Columbia in the unlikely event that such need arises.

Although we recently funded a regional walk-out plan, to enable us to manage what we know will be significant pedestrian traffic resulting from a downtown event, our evacuation planning is heavily automobile-based. We are now analyzing census data and information from our Department of Motor Vehicles to determine what areas in the District have high concentrations of residents without cars. We will adjust our plans for the use and deployment of buses based on this analysis. We will also integrate other options, such as water-based transport, into our evacuation planning. More importantly, we will much more specifically tailor our emergency preparedness training and education to address neighborhood-specific issues, so that individuals understand explicitly what they need to do in the face of an evacuation of their neighborhood.

We will also work more closely with the National Organization on Disabilities and our Disability Preparedness Center, as well as other residents with special needs and the organizations that serve them to ensure our evacuation planning is practical and makes sense for all District residents. We will review plans for nursing homes, hospitals, jails, halfway houses, and group homes to ensure that no one is left behind. We will likewise review our policies and make legislative changes if necessary regarding mandatory evacuation to identify those circumstances under which the Mayor should mandate evacuation. And finally, we will evaluate our plan under various road closure assumptions, since an event itself or the actions of federal agencies resulting from an event could impair the planned flow of traffic.

Another area of major review will be our sheltering capacity and planning. We currently have plans in place that would enable sheltering a portion of the District's nighttime population. Based on our own experience with sheltering Katrina evacuees at the DC Armory, there are a number of small but important logistical issues we have worked through that will improve future sheltering operations. But more importantly, we will be reevaluating our plans for situations that exceed our sheltering capacity. We do have mutual aid agreements and are a signatory to the Emergency Management Assistance Compact. And even on an informal basis within the region, we routinely work together and are currently collaborating on sheltering evacuees. But we will ensure our plans contemplate wholesale sheltering requirements that may arise as a result of a Katrina-level disaster.

We have worked hard since September 11 to improve our communications capabilities, within and across governments and between government and residents. We have achieved voice interoperability for first responders across the region and are developing full data interoperability, and we now have a regional alert notification system. But Katrina emphasized the importance of robustness and redundancy of communications systems, as well as their vulnerability during a massive event. We will be redoubling our efforts to sign up residents and business community for our alert systems. We will be reviewing our capabilities for communications among second responders and support personnel. We will be exploring the potential effectiveness of outdoor audible warning systems. And we will even more aggressively use our Citizens Awareness Campaign to convey the importance of individual and family planning to enable communications during and after an event.

More generally in terms of resident engagement, we firmly believe that participation is essential in the prevention, preparedness, response, mitigation and recovery from disasters of all magnitudes. Jurisdictions across the region have implemented Citizen Corps programs. Through Citizen Corps, we are developing a region-wide network of disaster volunteer reception centers in order to direct convergent, unaffiliated volunteers into an organization capable of deployment based on real time requests. These centers will fall under the guidance and in conformity with and activated under the direction of each respective jurisdiction's local emergency management office. In the wake of Katrina, we are reviewing our plans for activating volunteers to assist in our response, from Citizen Corps to the Emergency Healthcare Reserve Corps to the Medical Reserve Corps. In particular, we need to ensure that directly and through our volunteer network we reach residents of all social and economic backgrounds. As part of this process, we will strengthen our community outreach with a more grass roots, block-by-block, neighborhood-specific approach to disseminating information and engaging our community.

A general initial lesson learned from Katrina is the need for flexibility in plans. Many of our plans are built on basic assumptions that an event such as Katrina could shatter. Plans cannot account for every eventuality, but must be flexible and adaptable to a wide range of situations. The element of human behavior and the uncertainty it brings has to be factored in to response planning. We will be evaluating the flexibility of our plans and looking at the behavioral assumptions that are in them. One clear lesson is that we need to consider the perspective of the people on whom we are relying to respond, and the personal situation they may be facing in the

event of a major disaster. Not every person activated in our response plans is a response professional on a day-to-day basis; and although they have all been trained and have exercised our plans, we must consider and work to mitigate individual responses that may be inconsistent with the needs presented during an emergency. For example, we will review means of providing assurance of the safety of families of responders, so that the responders themselves can focus on their vital tasks.

Because the nation is still in the thick of the response to Katrina and just now entering the recovery phase, it is too early to have a comprehensive picture and therefore full after-action reporting of the event and the preparations for it. And here in the nation's capital, we have worked hard, particularly over the past four years, to strengthen our preparedness in a strategic and coordinated manner. I am confident that we are well prepared for most events that the region may face.

That said, we employ a continuous improvement philosophy when it comes to emergency preparedness. There already are lessons we are learning from Katrina and there will be more to come that will enhance and improve our capabilities and confidence. What has transpired on the Gulf Coast is certainly a human tragedy of unprecedented proportions in this country. We have a duty to ensure that we learn from this experience so that as a nation we never again experience a tragedy of that scale again.